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Definite & indefinite determiners ("articles"): Notes for teachers

The following booklet is part of my on-going research on articles or determiners in English – the definite *the*, the indefinite *a/an*, and the so-called null or zero article, i.e., bare nouns with no articles (Ø or zero article). My research has shown that Korean students have considerable difficulty with the following aspects of article use.

Object vs. material. The distinction between bare singular nouns versus *a/the* + nouns to distinguish, e.g. physical objects from materials.

> I drink **latte**. cf. I'd like to order **a latte**.

Bare plurals. Bare plurals are often used for talking about categories of things more abstractly, and for collections / groups / sets of things.

> **Penguins** are **birds** found in the Southern Hemisphere.
> I need to buy **potato chips.**

Hypothetical nouns. These nouns refer to hypothetical or as-of-yet unrealized things, states, or conditions.

> I want **a man** who knows what love is.

Exemplar nouns. A noun is used as an exemplar, or a prototypical representative of any or all members of that class. It is used as a narrative technique (as in the famous pop song below), and for definitions and descriptions in more formal and academic writing.

> In **the jungle**, **the lion** sleeps tonight.
> **The typical graduate student** spends $150 per semester on coffee.

Definitions & descriptions. English has several different ways of treating nouns in definitions and descriptions: bare plurals, hypothetical nouns, and exemplar nouns with *the,* with differing nuances in terms of vividness verses abstractness or generality.

Post-modified nouns. When a nouns followed by a prepositional phrase, relative clause, or other phrase, that phrase can modify the noun in such a way that it specifies or indicates a specific example, type, or instance of that noun. When the post-modifier functions in this way, an otherwise abstract bare noun can take *the*.

> **The feminism** of the 18th century developed out of the abolitionist movement.

Specialized uses. Some very specialized uses are explained particularly poorly in grammar books, textbooks, and reference books, as they have not been investigated or explained well in past linguistic research. This includes *the* for frequentive use, and bare nouns for more abstract nuances – especially in prepositional phrases, and especially in academic writing.

> I went to **the store.** (=Not necessarily one specific store, but a store where I regularly go.)
> The satellite is **in orbit.** (=Not a specific location, but a more general type of location.)
> I go to work **by bus.** (=Not a specific bus, but a bus as a general mode of transport.)

I have a student version with answers/explanations omitted, and the teacher version with brief explanations (this document). There are a few exercises in the student version, but it will be helpful to supplement these by first doing some shorter, simpler exercises. The exercises in the book show how lessons with *a*/*the*/Ø can probably be incorporated into any thematic or topical unit. It takes some creativity, and consideration of which function or semantic patterns would be relevant to a particular topic or communicative goal.

You are free to use these materials in your teaching, and please let me know how it goes. But please don't pass them on to others without attribution and without permission at this time, as I am still in the process of collecting and analyzing my research data and publishing my results. If you need to cite this material, you can cite one of my conference presentations (preferably the 2017 one).

1. Lee, K. (2017). Teaching determiners: Some cognitive approaches for university EFL learners. Presentation at KATE (Korean Association of Teachers of English) conference, June 2017, Seoul.

2. Lee, K. (2016). Determiner usage: Variation among native speakers and Korean university students. Presentation at KATE (Korean Association of Teachers of English) conference, July 2016, Seoul.

Summary of determiner patterns

Pattern 1: Indefinite

A/an: Indefinite =
- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

Pattern 2: Definite

The: Definite =
- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =
- Object or thing

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

Ø bare noun (singular) =
- Material, mass, substance

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =
- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

Detailed summary of determiner patterns

Pattern 1: Indefinite

A/an: Indefinite =
- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

- First mention
- Hypothetical example
- Definition (via hypothetical example)

Pattern 2: Definite

The: Definite =
- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

- Second / subsequent mention
- Special contexts:
  - Physical context
  - Specifier adj./phrase
  - Whole-part context
  - Background scene
  - Specialized background knowledge
  - Scene / topic shift
- Post-modifier / post-specifier (specific example / type / instance)
- Exemplar / typical example
  - Definition by exemplar
  - Habitual / typical activity

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =
- Object or thing

- Object / thing
- Specific type or batch (of material)
- Specific event / instance (of abstract noun)

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

**Ø bare noun (singular)** =
- Material

- Material, mass, substance
- Collective category noun (e.g., "equipment")
- General activity
- Abstract nouns
- Generalized nouns (general function, type of place, situation, etc. e.g., "in orbit")

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =
- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

- Group, set of things
- Category, type of things
- Generic description

Pattern 6: Compound nouns
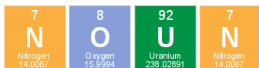
Compound nouns
- Determiner pattern depends on final noun

- Compounds
- Abbreviations
- Place names

Overview of determiner patterns

Pattern 1: Indefinite

A/an: Indefinite =
• New or unfamiliar
• Singular item / thing

First mention

Indefinite means not known to or familiar to the hearer / listener. Nouns can be indefinite in several ways. the default way is first mention in a context.

Hypothetical example

Nouns can be indefinite because they refer to hypothetical examples, things or ideas.

1. I want a man who knows what love is – a man who can cook, a man who can help with children, and a man who can have an intelligent conversation.

Definition (via hypothetical example)

The hypothetical function of the indefinite is then extended to definitions – standard dictionary-style definitions.

2. A penguin is a flightless bird that has adapted to using its wings for swimming.

Pattern 2: Definite

The: Definite =
• Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

Second / subsequent mention

Definite means familiar or known to the hearer/reader. The default way is by subsequent mention of a noun in a context (after being first identified as 'an X' it then becomes 'the X').

Other contexts

However, our idea of context can be expanded to other types as well. This includes those that are understood by inference based on the mental models that we create when we comprehend sentences.

– Physical context
  1. You can take the red pill, or the blue pill. (Referring to pills that he is holding in his hands)

– Specifier adj./phrase (e.g., comparative & superlative adj.).
  This one is more abstract. When we hear these forms, we create a mental model, e.g., "best model" leads to an abstract mental model of different possible ones, including the one that the speaker is probably referring to, which makes these nouns definite in an abstract linguistic sense.

2. The first option is the best one.

– Whole-part context.
Mention of the larger noun activates our mental model or schema for that noun, which includes parts of it that you are probably familiar with. Thus, the parts can be assumed to be familiar to you.

3. If you open up the computer, you will notice the hard drive and the motherboard.

– Background scene.
This one is a bit more complicated. Basically, we create a mental model or picture of whatever the speaker is talking about. If, e.g., the speaker refers to anything that involves going outside, that involves the sun, moon, sky, weather, or such; anything in a building invokes common mental knowledge of buildings, such as floors and walls; and an office invokes common knowledge of office equipment and personnel.

4. When I went to work this morning, **the weather** was bad, and **the sun** was not shining. When I came to work, I found that **secretary** was sick, water was dripping from **the ceiling,** and **the photocopier** was not working.

– Specialized background knowledge.
This is similar to and overlaps with the background scene, and is more common in academic and informative contexts.

5. When Koreans struggle with grammar, they may find **the** commercially available grammar books unhelpful.

– Scene / topic shift
The reader constructs a background scene on the fly, as the writer uses 'the' to introduce a scene shift. This is a narrative technique, and may not be relevant to learners other than advanced students.

6. As she rode along, **the** snow-capped mountain peaks glistened in the sun. She reminisced on her childhood spent near those mountains.

– Post-modifier / post-specifier (specific example / type / instance)
A relative clause, prepositional phrase, participle phrase, or other phrase after the noun can specify a particular instance, type, or example of a noun, including an otherwise abstract noun.

7. **The feminism** *of the nineteenth century* grew out of the abolitionist movement.

Exemplar based uses

A noun can be definite in an implicit sense, in that it does not refer to a specific physical entity, but a mental model that serves as a typical representative example of that thing – a prototypical or exemplar use of the noun. In the pop song example below, the reader constructs on the fly mental images of a typical jungle and a typical lion (based on his / her previous knowledge, including those seen in cartoons, nature shows, zoos, etc.), which represents any typical lion and jungle. Because of the mental imagery involved in interpreting it, a more vivid description results. This is a useful literary and narrative technique, and it can also be used in academic writing at times.

8. In the jungle the lion sleeps tonight.

9. The typical graduate student consumes a liter of coffee per day.

– Definition by exemplar

This can then be extended to a sort of definition that is a more vivid description than standard dictionary definitions.

10. The cheetah is the fastest land animal, capable of accelerating to 100 kph.

– Habitual / typical activity

The exemplar use can be extended to nouns that are used typically or habitually. This is comparable to the habitual use of the simple present tense. This habitual noun use includes examples that students have learned as confusing, bizarre ad hoc special rules, like using 'the' with musical instruments.

11. Today I took the bus to go to the office and the lab. On my way home I stopped by the store to buy milk.

12. Mary plays the piano.

Of course, one could also say "Mary plays piano" - which is perfectly grammatical, with a slightly more abstract nuance (see under bare singular nouns).

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =
- Object or thing

Object / thing

Singular nouns marked with a/an/the have a basic default meaning of objects or things, rather than materials. As such, they are bounded in or exist in space in time, and thus, have distinct physical boundaries (a water cf. water as a material), are distinct physical entities, are maybe more concrete, and can probably be pictured in one's mind more easily.

1. Give me a water and a coffee. (cf. 'water' or 'coffee')

Specified material

A material noun can be marked, especially with *a/an*, when referring to a particular type, example, instance, quantity, or batch of the material.

2. A cheese that I particularly like is Gouda.

Specific event / instance

Abstract nouns and nouns for general activities are usually bare nouns, but they can be marked to indicate a specific event or instance of an activity. As such, it is bounded in or occurring in space and time ('a good swim' that took place somewhere and some time specific).

3. I like swimming, and today I had **a** really good swim.

4. **The** theft is cause for concern.

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

Ø bare noun (singular) =
- Material

Material nouns

The default meaning of bare singular nouns is materials, mass, or substance, as opposed to object nouns. Material nouns are not physically or spatially bounded (e.g, water does not have inherent physical boundaries except those of its container), and thus, are a bit more abstract than object nouns.

1. I need coffee.

Collective nouns

This default meaning or function of bare nouns is extended to collective / category nouns (e.g., equipment, staff, faculty, personnel), which are usually used without determiners.

General activity

Since materials are not spatially bounded, the bare noun pattern can be extended to general activities (e.g., 'swimming'), which are not necessarily bounded in space or time.

2. I love swimming, jogging, and eating.

3. Beware of potential theft.

Abstract nouns

Abstract nouns are not necessarily bounded in, referring to, linked to, or occurring in a specific space or time, so the bare noun pattern easily applies to these.

4. The world needs more love and peace, and less war and hate.

For a specific type or instance, *the* with a specifier or post-modifer can be used, e.g., 'the peace of the Roman Empire.'

Generalized nouns

A noun that is usually an object noun (or otherwise marked noun) can be given a slightly more abstract meaning by deleting the determiner. This emphasizes the general function, type of place, or situation of the noun. For example, 'in orbit' is not necessarily bounded to a specific place or time, but refers to a more general situation or function of the noun. This is particularly common in academic English, e.g., when linguists say 'in dialect' as a type of language, while non-linguists might say 'in a dialect.'

5. The satellite is in orbit.
6. The children were speaking in dialect.

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =
- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

Group or set of things

By default, bare plural nouns refer to a set or group of objects or things.

1. I need to buy **eggs** at the store.

Categories and generic descriptions

The group meaning can be extended to the entire group of things, to talk about categories or make generalizations. Since this pattern can be used for generalizations, it can be used for generic descriptions, e.g., encyclopedia style descriptions – similar to dictionary definitions, but here based on generalizations and categories.

2. **Penguins** are small, flightless aquatic birds. **Penguins** have adapted to cooler climates and using wings for swimming.

Pattern 6: Compound nouns
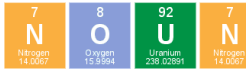
Compound nouns
- Determiner pattern depends on head noun

The determiner patterns of compounds depend on the head noun or main noun of the compound phrase.

1. **The computer manual** uses **a rather unclear flow chart** to illustrate **RAM chip installation**.

Abbreviations

This also applies to abbreviations.

2. **The CIA** has a different jurisdiction here than **the FBI.**

   (CIA = the Central Intelligence Agency; FBI = the Federal Bureau *of Investigation*)

Note: A few abbreviations have come to be treated as proper nouns rather than as abbreviations, e.g., NASA.

Place names

A few place names curiously use *the* for reasons that books usually do not make clear. These are best understood as compound phrases where a common geographic term has been omitted.

3. **The Amazon** is still a fairly unexplored place, as is **the Congo**.

   (The Amazon = The Amazon River, the Amazon Basin, the Amazon region; the Congo = the Congo River or the Congo region)

Basic patterns

Students probably learned these before in school, but were not taught clearly; e.g., what do definite and indefinite really mean?

1. **Indefinite *A/an*:**
    The first time a noun is mentioned, it is marked with *a/an*.

    A/an indicates that a noun is unknown or unfamiliar to the reader or listener in the context, e.g., a newly mentioned noun.

2. **Definite *The*:** Subsequent mentions of a noun are marked with *the*.

    The indicates that the noun is known or familiar to the reader or listener in the context, e.g., if it has been mentioned previously (an "old" noun).

    The first time a specific noun (e.g., an object noun) is mentioned, this is generally indicated with *a/an*, while *the* generally indicates that the noun was mentioned before.

Object vs. material

3. **Bare singular noun = stuff**
    The default meaning of bare singular nouns refers to physical substance, material, or mass. For example, *water, chicken, coffee* refer to materials, rather separate, distinguishable objects, which is why they are uncountable nouns when used this way.

4. ***A/an* + singular noun = thing**
    The default meaning of *a/an* + singular noun refers to an object or thing. For example, *a water* (e.g., a bottle of water), *a chicken* (a whole animal), *a coffee* (a cup of coffee) refer to separate, distinguishable objects, which is why they are countable.

Sets & categories

Bare plural = set / category of things
Bare plural nouns indicate a category of things; or a set, group or collection of things (object nouns).

This is the default plural for *a/an* + noun; e.g., *a chicken → chickens, a bird → birds*. It is commonly used for when we speak of a set, group, or collection of things, e.g., or more than one physical object. This collective / set use is extended to generic descriptions of things, e.g., in textbook and encyclopedia descriptions, and this generic plural is quite common in academic English.

Hypotheticals

***A/the* = hypothetical usage**

The article *a/an* can indicate a hypothetical noun, i.e., a hypothetical case or example, something that has not happened yet, or something that is not specific in the writer's / speaker's mind. This hypothetical usage is then extended to the genre of definitions, e.g., in textbooks and encyclopedias. It is slightly more vivid than the generic plural, which is for general descriptions.

Activity vs. event: Bare vs. marked noun

A bare noun can indicate a more general, abstract type of activity, while the article *a/an* (or *the*) can indicate a specific event or situation or a specific instance of such an activity.

Special contexts with *the*

A noun can be considered familiar or identifiable in special contexts like the following:
   a) Physical context – physically present (the *red pill* example)
   b) Specifiers – modifier words that specify one item out of a group (of things or possibilities)
   c) Part-whole context – it is part of something else, which is familiar to the listener (the computer components example)
   d) It is part of the background scene.

Type (d) can be especially tricky. This includes what some have called social or cultural context, but it is better understood in terms of the psychological concept of schema, that is, a conceptual framework and the accompanying mental picture or scene For example, if Speaker A talks about going to work to Listener B, this invokes in their minds their commonly held knowledge and mental pictures of going between home and work in their city, including transportation, streets, homes, public buildings, and the weather outside. This constitutes their background knowledge and background scenes, the background scene of commuting to/from work. Anytime you talk about anything happening in a building, that invokes your normal mental pictures and concepts of buildings, with background knowledge and mental pictures of buildings (either abstract or specific mental images), including the exterior, interior, walls, ceilings, floors, and so on. Talking about one's workplace or office invokes our mental pictures of the typical background – what one normally finds in an office (desks, office workers, secretaries, computers, etc.).

Special contexts

Also background scene or background knowledge; implied familiarity

We have a few more special types of contexts, which are difficult. The following type is difficult to predict from context, and it seems to depend mainly on the speaker's perspective, rather than the listener's.

> E.g.: **The various grammar books and language textbooks** cannot explain this phenomenon.

In this case, the writer assumes that the reader can easily infer or guess what s/he is talking about, and so these are implicitly familiar – the specific items are implied by the writer and inferred by the reader. The above sentence could be interpreted as follows.

- • = those that I have seen
- • = those that are commonly sold or used in this country
- • = those that you are probably familiar with, because you've probably used them in school and bought them from bookstores to study

This is one of the more difficult aspects of the usage of *the*, as it is very difficult to predict from context (it can usually be inferred and interpreted quite well, but learners may find its use very unexpected, and they may not know how to use it themselves). It is also not understood very well among linguists.

We could add scene shifts to the above list of special contexts; this is more of a narrative technique, e.g., in novels. A new noun is identified with *the*, for a shift to a related scene, which the reader can infer and understand fairly easily. Similarly, writers use this method to shift to new but familiar topics as well as scenes in narrative writing.

Special contexts with *the* (revised)

a) Physical context – physically present (the *red pill* example)
b) Specifier words or phrases
c) Part-whole context
d) Background scene
e) Implied familiarity
f) Scene shifts / topic shifts

Post-specifiers

A post-modified noun (i.e., followed by a prepositional phrase, relative clause, or other phrase) be indicated with *the* as identifiable or familiar, if that phrase serves to indicate a specific instance, type, or example of the noun.

Some post-modified nouns might be definitions or general descriptions, rather than nouns that indicate a specific type, instance, or example. Notice how definitions and descriptions can use different determiner patterns to achieve different nuances.

Exemplar *the*

A noun can be used as an exemplar, that is, a hypothetical or putative example that serves as a representative for all members of that class.

This is commonly used in narratives, as in story-telling, and it is sometimes used in more academic writing and other genres to discuss something as a typical example. This causes the listener to create a mental image of a typical item (e.g., a typical lion, jungle, or student), which makes the text or story more vivid. This is extended to a special type of definition or description by typical example, which is more vivid than hypothetical style definitions.

Habitual activity

The can indicate a noun or type of noun that is used regularly or frequently; e.g., *the store* = a place or type of nearby place where you regularly shop.

Specialized use of bare singular = more abstract / general

An object noun can be used as a bare noun, especially in prepositional phrases, to make the meaning more general or abstract, e.g., "a general type of X, not a specific X." For example, *in orbit* refers not to a specific location, but to 'orbit' as a general type of position; *at school* refers not necessarily to a specific location or school, but a place where you do normal school things.

Compounds

The determiner patterns of compound nouns depend on the last noun of the compound, which determines its semantic (meaning) properties. With abbreviations, it depends on the most important or meaningful word (usually the last or nearly last word) word of what it stands for.

Definite & indefinite determiners: Summary

Fill out the table below to create a summary of the more important patterns in the determiner worksheet. Which determiner types go with which combinations of features?

	Generic / general	Specific
Objects, specific items – Singular		
Objects / things – Plural		
Material, substance		
Activities, events		
Definitions, examples		
Post-modifiers		

For each determiner type (a, the, null), draw a concept map or flow chart that summarizes its basic meaning, and its various other meanings or uses.

Writing exercises (advanced / academic)

In groups, discuss one of the following, and write a short answer below.

1. Think of an intelligent, well-made film that impressed you the most. What genre was it? What is typical of that film genre, and in what ways was the film typical or less typical of the genre? What happened in the film? What aspects of the film were more memorable or impressive, and why?

2. You are a new professor, and you have received a research grant to start a new research lab, or a research institute (e.g., a science / social science research lab, or a humanities / social science research center).

   • Write a brief description of what the room(s) and layout will look like.

   • Since anything that you buy with the grant money has to go through the department, write a paragraph explaining the materials, equipment, and other resources that you need your department to order for you, with a brief explanation of why you need them, and how you will use them.

3. Think of a famous research study (or a famous discover, or an important scholarly work) in your field. How was it done, or how do you think it might have been done? Explain what they were trying to find, and how they went about finding it.

Appendix

There are lots of noun pairs or quasi-pairs like the following, and I plan to compile a more complete list later. Here are a few that I removed from the section comparing marked vs. bare nouns.

More bare cf. marked singulars[1]

deer	venison
calf	veal
line (e.g., family / ancestral line)	lineage
plant	flora
airplane	aircraft
(kitchen) utensil, knife, fork, spoon	silverware, cutlery (=formal or older British)

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1   The bare nouns here are bare by default, but some can take *the* in certain contexts.